

# GENDER EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY: A BUDDHIST VIEW FOR MODERN WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

*In the contemporary world gender equality and egalitarian society have been most debated issue. The Buddha since foundation his religion was very vocal about equal status of women and inculcation of democratic values in the society. The Buddha was one of the first thinkers of India who encouraged gender equality by founding orders of nuns. Buddhist values always promote equality among men and women and coexistence of all elements of society. This paper also contends that while social and legal reforms are essential, it is meditation that ultimately uproots the innate conditioning of both the oppressors and the oppressed as the Dhamma at its pristine and transformative core is genderless. Buddha was against in any sort of discrimination that is based on colour, lineage, birth etc. In the modern world conflict is rampant. Buddhist values of gender equality among projection of right of women and sustainable development of society.*

In 21<sup>st</sup> century the position of women in Buddhism has been introspected through many lenses. In modern era women are competing with men in every field. There has been a sense of equality in both men and women. The gender equality is essential

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for ensuring that they both can contribute fully at work, at home and in public life for the betterment of economies and societies at large. The men and women are regarded as the two wheels of cart. The one wheel cannot move forward if the other one is smaller than the other one. India is male dominated society. The women were subjected to the control of their families, and husbands. They had to be under the care of parents in childhood, in youth in the protection of husband and in their old age they have to be under control of their son. The picture of Indian women records moderately dismal lot prior to the advent of the Buddha. (Goyal, 1987:292-98) Against this background the opportunity obtainable by Buddhism to leave their families and seek personal salvation was truly revolutionary. So one can see that all forms of actual discrimination well eliminated but the aspiration towards gender equality, despite the restriction of the era a large number of Buddhist women who had been ordained in the Buddhist Order. In the early period both male and lay women were prominent sponsors of caityas, caves and images. Bhikkhunīs and Upāsikās also participated in the sponsorship of some of the earliest Buddha images. In Sri Lanka, ten of the early (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to 1<sup>st</sup> CE) Brāhmī inscription edited by Paranavitana records the donation of caves to the saṅgha by bhikkhunīs as against nearly about 300 by bhikkhus (Paranavitana 1970:cv-cvi, cxvii). There are many inscriptions from Sāñcī, Bhārhut, Kaṇheri, Kārle, Kuḍa, Nāsik, Pauni, Amrāvātī and Mathurā show that bhikkhunīs were major sponsors of the early monuments. Gregory Scopchen has calculated that at Sāñcī there were 129 bhikkhus and bhikkhunī donor was 125, Bhārhut there were 16 bhikkhunīs and 26 bhikkhus donors, Amrāvātī there were 12 bhikkhu and 12 bhikkhunī as donors. (Scopchen, 1988-89:164). Even at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa in Andhra Pradesh women of royal families were prominent donors. (Chaudhury, 1982: 229-232). The 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE inscription shows that bhikkhunīs played an active role in the erection of caityas and vihāras. Bhikkhunīs Upāsikās, queens, and mothers played a significant role, and without their participation the monuments would have been lesser places.

In ancient India the position of woman doesn't appear to have a very happy one. The women were neglected in the society in

Buddha's time. They had no free will. They were confined to the four walls of their home. The *Samyutta Nikāya* (Samyutta, 86) refers that king of Kosala Pasenadi was not happy that queen Mallikā had given birth of a girl child. The Buddha comforted him by saying that girl child breed noble men, who protect the world. But one cannot refute that generally trend of people was partial to birth of boy child. Besides being physically weak women cannot make decree for Buddhahood. She must try to become male and then would be eligible for Buddhahood. (Barua, 1997: 65). Karma Lekshe Tsomo gave a speech at the 2006 Global Buddhist Conference in Perth; she delivered her speech about equality between men and women in Buddhism. In the Theravada tradition, she spoke, women are equal to have the opportunity of being liberated from samsāra and are allowed to become *arhats*, enlightened beings, but there isn't an equal opportunity to become ordain. In Mahayana, there is a disparity of equality, because when becoming a fully enlightened Buddha one must be in the male form, an idea that comes from the *Lotus Sutra*. The *Vimaladattā Sūta* reveals that a woman called Vimaladattā who by virtue of her vow to attain Buddhahood changes her body into a male. The lord Buddha admired her. He said that Vimaladattā already practiced Bodhisattva deed several enlightenment even earlier that did Mañjusrī. The assumption of bodily transformation is mentioned in many other texts, as such *Vimaladattā Paripṛcchā*, *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūta*, *Sumati dārikā Paripṛcchā*, *Stirīvivarta vyākaraṇa*, *Aśokadattā vyākaraṇa*. But none of these texts give evidence of sensual inequity. The theory of tathāgatagarbha including the fundamental idea that only one who has a female nature can attain Buddhahood. The concept of sensual transformation for enlightenment appears to be a strategy that eventually led to a theory of enlightenment in a female body. But the Buddha was reluctant to give permission because he was aware to maintain the purity of the Saṅgha. It is universally proved that it is extremely difficult to lead pure and holy life while the men and women come close together. In few suttas Lord Buddha advised lay persons to respect their mothers, wives, daughters. He

did not encourage polygamy and tried to emphasize of the benefit of limited on one wife. The primary reason to refuse the first request of Bhikkhunī as the Lord Buddha was concerned about security of women. Therī Uppalavaṇṇā faced tragic situation of sensual harassment. The *Dhammapada Commentary* (Dhp-Ath, 178) records that Uppalavaṇṇā returned and lay herself down on her bed, and then her cousin Ānanda concealed himself in her hut in Andhavana, suddenly came out and committed rape on her. From at that time onwards by the order of the Buddha the nuns were prohibited from living in the forest (Vin, III: 35) The Therīgāthā shows the relief which obtained by women who faced many domestic violence. In few suttas Lord Buddha advised lay persons to respect their parents. From the fundamental Buddhist rules called five precepts (Pañcasīla), the sensual misconduct. Lord Buddha in Sigālowāda Sutta admired Upasikas who respect their wives, and provide them necessities. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E the consciousness of Lord Buddha about gender equality and violence against women is a wonderful fact. History records that the ancient Sri Lankan women proved their talents in teaching, education sector, and medical sector as nurses and attendance women gave remarkable contributions to the agriculture and commercial sector of the country. The most striking fact is, they have been treated with sufficient remuneration and social status similar to their male. (Indrani, 35-48.) So the chief eight rules imposed on women before admission in the Order. These rules gave subordinate position to women. In spite of such hard conditions women accepted all because their yearning for knowledge and emancipation were intensive. In modern era many Buddhist women through their perseverance and skillful negotiations, many women manage to take part in retreats and other Dharma activities. These women are also engaged in trying to spread Dharma activities. These women are also engaged in trying to spread Dharma, in their own way women still lag far behind man in numbers and development but the situation is slowly improving. Today's world women's retreat and Dharma classes are led by these devoted women. The Buddhist women from urban or rural areas whatever they are educated, illiterate, rich or poor these women are keenly interested in learning more about the Buddhadharmā and in

developing their understanding through meditation and reflection. Women of urban areas achieving their goals day by day, but on the other side Tai Phake Buddhist women of Assam are facing many psychological, economical, gender discrimination, and domestic violence due to dowry or for some other reason. Even now the both male and female go to religious places as well as in any festival they both wear traditional attire. Tai Phake has also been influenced by modernization in various aspects such as economic, political, social and cultural. Education level is getting higher. Now a day's Tai Phake Buddhist women achieved their goals in every field and their own society's women are not at all abandoned.

Women should have more education opportunities than any time in history. Buddhism plays in maintaining gender inequality in education. The aim of Buddhist teachings is to educate the male or female to overcome dukkha or suffering. So the first step is to insist on equal education opportunities for the women. Then equal opportunities for education, ordination and economic development will virtually bring many changes for women. According to Lord Buddha all sentient beings have equal potential for enlightenment. But today's Buddhist women are more active in technologies and we should support women's who use such technology to address issues including violence against women, political empowerment, education, preaching Dhamma and health care in remote and marginalized areas. Technology initiative will achieve the more safe online spaces for women and girls or women's rights organizing, to advance women's rights for designing and shaping technology for leadership in the east and west countries.

In contemporary society, women in Buddhist world generally take on more submissive roles than any other male counterparts. So, at present women should be granted the right to practice and achieve Enlightenment, regardless of their background or nationality. Monks like Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikkhu Analayo, and Venerable Ajahn Brahm among many others Bhikkhus also assures us that women's ordination will accord with the Vinaya and not harm Buddhism. The first ordained women Mahāpajāpati Gotami

but Venerable Ānanda was supportive to her and also the five hundred Sākya ladies. The Lord Buddha imposed the eight rules may be due to some socio-religious factors that prevailed in India that time. Therefore, the relation between bhikkhu and bhikkhunīs would be like teacher and student. As a rule, teachers should have some rights and privileges in order to guide the students. Buddha's sympathy and love for women knew no bound. History shows him to have been the greatest benefactor of women even born in India. The Buddha kept his way open to all classes of women, married, unmarried, slaves, widows and even to courtesans. Buddhism notices all human beings are equal in dignity and rights neutrally of consideration such as caste, colour, race, creed, gender etc. Buddhism doesn't recognize rights and freedoms for the male which cannot be extended to the female. Indeed as borne out by Therīgāthā women actually enjoy a higher position of intellectual freedom under Buddhism, being able thereby to gain spiritual advancement on an equal basis. The Buddha described women as one of the seven jewels (Samyutta, 1960: 83). Mahāpajāpatī succeeded in founding the bhikkhunī Saṅgha and skilfully guides its development until her death. Mahāpajāpatī and her followers freed themselves from the recommended roles that allotted them. They blazed new pathways for women both personally and socially. Instead of being confined to the expected female roles of house wife and mother, thousands of women at the time of the Buddha became seekers, many of whom were publicly recognized by the Buddha as outstanding paradigms of spiritual attainment. A rich merchant's daughter Sujātā who had offered a bowl of milk rice to the emaciated renouncing Siddhartha and who sustained the fledgling the Buddha in the crucial days leading up to his final awakening, was one of the first to enter his newly discovered path to liberation. Thousands of women became respected arhats and were recognized by the Buddha himself for their extraordinary attainments: Uppalavaṇṇa and Patācāra for their excellent monastic discipline, Khemā for her great wisdom, Dhammadinnā for her proficiency in teaching the Dhamma, Nandā for her dedication, Soṇa for her energetic determination and so on. Not only nuns but also eminent Upāsikās were recognized by Buddha. Visākhā (Kassapa, 306- 310). The pious daughter of a rich man became renowned for her exceptional

generosity to the Saṅgha. The eminent qualities and spiritual attainments of outstanding women, the Buddha began challenging centuries-old views about women as objects for defeat and neglect. The story of these renowned women's bravery has withstood twenty five hundred years of telling and has provided significant meaning and encouragement to millions of the women in the generations that have followed. The Bhābrū and Schism Pillar edicts of Asoka mention bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs were equally powerful in matter of unity or division in the Buddhist Fraternity. (Barua, 1997: 75). In contemporary era American Buddhist women arguably more forward about quality than their British counterparts, they enjoy learning Dharma with the bhikkhus, but the bhikkhus also wanted to learn from bhikkhunīs. Afterwards the bhikkhus invited the Amaravati and Chithurst Siladhara to establish a training monastery for nuns in U.S. Later the Theravāna bhikkhus such as Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikkhu Analayo, and Bhikkhu Sujato spoke noticeably of their support for the reinstatement of bhikkhunī ordination. Through the work of Karma Lekshe Tsomo many more women Buddhist nuns have been ordained and given education and better jobs. Buddhist women follow ordained male role models, and this shows the inequality between men and women. The humanitarian work that is being done in Asia by Buddhist women shows that there is hope for the better sustainable society.

Sustainable development is defined as development that is the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (World Commission, 43). The importance of educational and cultural experiences within their educational programs, for example, in terms of the number of schools in India educates number of girl and women. India is a nation on the move, slowly making its place among the top nations of the world. One of the biggest challenges facing this growing power is the science education of its sizeable young population. A majority of India's population still lives in economically conditions. Under such circumstances for educational institutions to keep pace with scientific and technological innovations is a challenge in itself. There are well- publicized international imperatives advancing education for women and girls in Science, Technology, Education,

and Mathematics (STEM) fields, rarely in STEM education linked with empowering Buddhist bhikkhunīs. This STEM education advances all levels of teaching and learning particularly in tertiary education, for Buddhist nuns and novices in STEM fields. It regards education as a basic human need and agrees with Karma Lekshe Tsomo, one of the forthright advocates of the education of Tibetan Buddhist nun, that impartial educational opportunity for women is a human right. This study regards STEM education as a kind of transformative education devoted to relieving material and social suffering in the world. This education helps women, girls to achieve their spiritual goals, develop their identities, and in STEM fields prepare nuns for leadership roles not just in science education but in infrastructure and sustainability projects. Today more than 160,000 Buddhist bhikkhunīs worldwide work in all its multiplicity, as a manifestation of their monastic vows worldwide work. (Karma, 2004, 342-366.)

According to Buddhism, argument, intolerance and disharmony arise out of desires, hatred and ignorance. To develop confidence, tolerance and harmony it is important to cultivate common values or universal ethics. Thus, promotion of education, dialogue, social and economic development would lead for sustainable development of peace in the world. The cross culture exploratory and experimental study is firmly rooted in international initiatives to advance women's right and empowerment. It explores the Dalai Lama's perspective on western, scientific curricular and pedagogy within the monastic community. In the modern world STEM education regard as instrumental for empowering Buddhist bhikkhunīs. As significant moral and ethical actors in fulfilling their vows to improve the spiritual and material conditions for all sentient beings. His Holiness Dalai Lama who since issuing a progressive imperative in 1999 has actively promoted secular and science-based education among monastic community.

STEM education that integrates Buddhist and western knowledge in the Saṅgha as well as Buddhist institutions. This study found the historical and religious marginalization of bhikkhunīs persists in the context of science education programs and resources. It supports the evolution of more gender inclusive



Buddhist institutions and leadership as it supports using Buddhist moral and ethical guidance to address the endemic fraud and corruption associated with sustainable development and infrastructure projects. This study is also predicated upon a Buddhist understanding of dishonesty as a manifestation of greed, hatred and delusion. STEM education is important because our modern world depends on it. The economic, social and general well being- it is all backed by science, technology, engineering and math. His Holiness Dalai Lama, the undisputed spiritual leader of Himalayan Buddhists, speaks out forcefully and repeatedly for religious equality, personally and endorsing women's right to full ordination, any resistance to the idea of improving conditions for nuns is ordinarily expressed in more subtle ways, such as neglecting to help. In 1998 His Holiness Dalai Lama impelled educational reforms to the Buddhist curriculum which in some cases had not changed for centuries. (Yee, 2009). H. H. Dalai Lama the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) program, part of UNESCO's strategy for the Decade (2005-2014), which defines education for sustainable development as, a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities. **STEM** Education (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs specifically focused on women and girls provide confidence, an innovative spirit, and the necessary skills needed to compete in the workforce. Today's world Education will be an increasingly powerful collaborator of Buddhist nuns. These STEM initiatives afford Buddhist bhikkhunīs opportunities to honour their monastic vows to care for sentient beings and to engage the world in disciplinary provinces that have needlessly been inaccessible to women. These initiatives could herald a transformation of Buddhist female monastic educational traditions and humanitarian work as well as a revaporization of core Buddhist teachings. STEM educational initiatives for Buddhist nuns, as well as cultivating nuns as humanitarian leaders practicing active compassion in the context of sustainable development of the modern society.

It is fundamental for societies to educate children about the

equality of genders and harmful nature of discrimination at home. We know that home is the first school and parents are the first teachers. Mindfulness practice a skilful means enables us to go beneath the surface level of our moment to moment life experiences. It allows to see the truth of what is happening which are clouded with emotions, habitual thinking. We can develop mindfulness through the practice of formal meditation practice. Meditation increased awareness of one's mental life can reduce emotional and cognitive habits. Meditation related to the body with the objective of decrease its significance, the loving kindness metta, it belonging to the Four immeasurable - Āppamānas, provides another meditative subject that has great significance both in terms of exterminating negative sensitivities and fostering positive emotions. (Nanamoli, 2010:236-258). In modern era meditation has become more crucial mainstream secular technique in the West largely extricate from its Buddhist source, it is used not only psychotherapy but also every sphere of society from education, sports, business to even military. (Kwee, 2006). Contemplation of the Body (kāyānupassanā) is another one of the Ten Recollections and one of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipatthāna) that involves the observation and categorization of the body to thirty three parts and its processes with a focus on its impermanent repulsive and illusory nature. (Nanamoli, 2010). The opportunity for training and participating in research should reach all corners of the society, including the minorities, the underprivileged and the economically backward classes.

Modern education deals almost exclusively with the minds, the practice of Dāna. If we give more to our society then one can see the practice of Dāna which is more important than receiving. We should share our wealth, talent, wisdom or insight. Buddhism makes a meaningful contribution to liberating the modern world from violence and oppression; we should confront the root cause of evil, greed, hared, and delusion in the society. For all these we should practice right mindfulness. The eightfold Path consist of Right Speech, Right action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right Views and Right Intention- resulting finally in paññā (insight). It is at the end of

gradual training of the mind. We must create an inner piece along with an understanding of social realities and structural violence as extra profit for both individual and collective liberation. Full liberation is both individual and societal. In Buddhism the most important requirement for training mind is to achieve tranquillity (*samatha*), the true nature of one's psycho constitution, technique for understanding. It becomes an integral factor for right understanding from intellectual knowledge. Self awareness can also be used over own society, nation-state, culture and even our Buddhist Tradition. Mindfulness supports the moment to moment intention to not cause harm, to be kind and to renounce those thoughts and action that lead to heedlessness. Without wise intention and wise understanding, mindfulness is aimless. We can then transform our society more peaceful and sustainable, a society would be full of goodness for all beings and there will not be any inequality.

Buddha taught that everyone is same and Buddhist scriptures demonstrate gender transformation is used as a tool to promote equality among genders by using a transgender being. It can be said that gender is a worldly concept. The Vinaya shows honoured members with high spiritual attainment that are also transgender. The Buddha clearly accepts a person who into the religious community even if they transform gender. Still the Lord Buddha looks beyond patriarchal bounds and individual themselves as well as the weird. People are all capable of becoming enlightened to be buddhas regardless of gender, age, social class, and race. (Kurihara, 2009:94–111.) Gender identity for the third sex becomes a matter that is solvable with a willingness to be progressive by certain monastic communities and religious authorities. The Buddha taught that everyone is equal that physical properties of a person are not to affect their minds capacity for dhamma or their ability to achieve *nibbāna*. Buddhist precepts are designed to upgrade the equality of an individual's mind. There will be nothin harmful for society if two people whether they are different gender as gay, straight or lesbian relationship as long as they are behaving skilfully towards the other persons. Therefore, Buddhism clarifies the difference between essence and manifestation, consuming Buddhist equality. A core Buddhist idea affirms that the basic nature of the human mind is innocent and pure. Buddhist wisdom differentiates between essence

and manifestation, discerning that all beings are equal in nature but present in various forms such as status, shape, and colour.

## CONCLUSION

Today's women have proved themselves to be extraordinary. They have deserved a greater and an equal role as compared to men with their hard works and even outclassed men in many instances. Buddhist men and women have nearly equal opportunities to education, ordination and facilities for religious practices. In Buddhist societies, women are generally trained to be humble and self-effacing, but monks have the power and freedom to speak out and therefore can be great advocates on behalf of equal opportunities for them. While women must gain their own voices, bhikkhus can also be tremendously helpful in transforming societal attitudes toward women. Among the greatest obstacles Buddhist women face today is their limited access to qualify teachers and adequate educational facilities. Despite the gender equality of the Buddha's own views, in later era, the Buddhist view of women changed under the influence of societal norms and systems prejudicial to women's interests. This resulted in such teachings as they must be excluded from holy sites. Without a doubt the intersection between Buddhism and feminism is a growing field of interest as shown by the numerous studies done in recent years. India. Buddhism sees all human beings are equal in dignity and rights irrespective of consideration such as colour, caste, race, creed, gender etc. The *Therīgāthā* suggests that women actually enjoy freedom at the time of Buddha. They were able to attain spiritual advancement on an equal basis. Modern egalitarian expectations require men and women to have equal access to Buddhist practices and for these to have equal significance. Contemporary women are establishing equal access to stereological attainments, constructing the Buddhist path in more recognizably feminine ways. Even so, there are also many benefits that may result from recognizing the equality of women, including greater support for the Saṅgha that would naturally accrue to the bhikkhuss. Women can help to revitalize the tradition through conscientious practice in the ways that will rekindle piety. They can contribute to a general resurgence of Buddhist scholarship, and help to educate a generation of Buddhist followers who will

broaden the base of spiritual and ethical paradigms. Giving women an equal opportunity is wholeheartedly encouraging them in teachings and the practice of meditation. It can have many beneficial consequences. A spiritually nourished woman is capable to counsel families, meditate disputes, endure safe communities, set public policies, and build a sustainable society through implementing Buddhist values of tolerance and compassion.

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Gender equality means providing equal opportunities to both men and women in political, economic, education and health aspects. Importance of Gender Equality. Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) – GDI is a gender centric measure of Human Development Index. GDI considers parameters like life expectancy, education, and incomes in assessing the gender equality of a country. In Indian society from a long time back, the social structure has been such that the women are neglected in many areas like education, health, decision-making areas, financial independence, etc. Another major reason, which contributes to the discriminatory behavior towards women in India, is the dowry system in marriage. Gender equality is not just the concern of half of the world’s population; it is a human right, a concern for us all, because no society can develop – economically, politically, or socially – when half of its population is marginalized. We must leave no one behind. This is a year of global action. Governments will adopt a new set of Sustainable Development Goals, work together to draft a meaningful climate agreement, and craft a framework to provide the financial resources needed to deliver on a global sustainable development agenda. Publication does not imply endorsement of views by the World Economic Forum. To keep up with the Agenda subscribe to our weekly newsletter. Gender equality, also known as sexual equality or equality of the sexes, is the state of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making; and the state of valuing different behaviors, aspirations and needs equally, regardless of gender. Gender equality is the goal, while gender neutrality and gender equity are practices and ways of thinking that help in achieving the goal. Gender parity, which is used to measure gender